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## THE LURE OF LITTLE ROADS

BY CHARLES BUXTON GOING

**G**REAT highways are like the rumor of gold or the sound of a drum, summoning men to follow them round the shoulder of the world. Their very pavement thrills with memories of the calling of trumpets and murmurs with echoes of the feet of caravans. War, merchandising, adventure made the highroad, and of such spirits it is both creature and creator. But the little path is a child of enchantment playing with spells of gentle magic amid which it was born. Its fluttering fingers of green pretend to lay hold of foot or hand or garment as if to stay us, and yet with every touch it woos us to advance. Through its whisperings we may hear the far winding of elfin horns. It coaxes us step by step, half-hinting at some lovely surprise just about to be disclosed, and yet withal awakes within us the subtle sense of a mystery reaching beyond the stars.

It is indeed the page of Titania—the messenger of Pan; and to their loyal subjects it is ever ready to prove its mission by showing the royal signet. But as the gods and half-gods, seeking intercourse with mortals, take on human shape, so the path where it touches the busier ways of men wears a homely garb of everyday acquaintance. See with what convincing frankness it passes through the gap in the fence, inviting the footfarer merely to a wise economy of travel! Will you take the shortcut? The stepping-stones and the footlogs will serve you as faithfully as they do the fox and the squirrel. Instead of white sunglare on white dust you shall have the cool of tree shadows, the soft turf under foot, and the fragrance of elder and wild rose in your face. You shall save a half-mile distance and gain a half hour of peace and delight. A half-hour? There is no time measure for such sweetness of life as one gains in a field path in early summer!

No scythe has yet shorn the meadow. The grass stands knee-high or hip-high. Upon it or in it float the purple-blue haze of the timothy blossom, the blush of the red-top, the white gleam of daisies, the golden shimmer of buttercups. Stone walls show here and there, like fragments of gray reef in a sea of green overswept by the clambering and waving growth that first harbored in their shelter. Curving in and out along them, as if upon a beach on which the wind ripples of the grass were breaking, runs a feathery white band of meadow-rue and blackberry blossom and tossing white heads of elder.

Everywhere Nature for a season has thrown her unconquerable powers into alliance with the leaf-budding, flower-blossoming forces of the field, and their triumphant hosts pour over each grim or sordid work of ugliness, marking the advance of man or the ravage of the elements. The footlogs spanning the stream seem to blend with the banks, so insensibly does the green turf thin away to the moss that covers the wood, so smoothly does the brown line of the path merge into the weather-tinted grain of the timber—no scars, no harsh edges, no sharp planes. The grasses of the bank dip into the slow-moving current and mingle with pickerel weed and arrowhead growing in the shallows, and these blend again with water-crowfoot

and pondweed streaming in the channel. A chromatic scale runs from mid-creek to mid-meadow.

Our path dips into the binnekill whose pools (where they still show like shallow craters in the long meadow) are bottomed by lakes of blue-flag into which frogs and an occasional turtle plunge hastily as we approach. Here too the redwing blackbirds gather, alighting in the reeds with a final quiver of wings and a startling cadence that sounds as if it were drawn with the violin bow over bars of some vibrant compound of glass and metal. Everywhere soaring and skimming swallows; under all a background of chirring insects, a symphony of mingled bird songs; around it all, warm-scented lakes of sunlight in which sleep the island shadows of trees.

Look ahead and see how Nature the all-coverer has carpeted the path. It is as green as the meadow beside it, with a verdure not merely shorter but of different texture. After haying; when the knives of the mower have cut it all to one even nap, the foot-track will show even more distinctly than it does now, and its erratic curves, once made no doubt to avoid obstacles long gone and forgotten, remain the same year after year. Indeed, if the path were unused for many seasons its trace across the fields would yet persist—like a familiar signature almost faded out, not perhaps to be followed in detail, but under certain lighting unmistakable.

Follow on through the river meadow. On one side lush grass of the wet bottoms and a fringe of alders; on the other the ripening hayfield, bee-loud and fragrant, stretching away to the rail fence and the line of elms marking the road. No whirling dust-cloud from speed-mad motorists reaches hither; the very noise of their horns is damped out by sweeter vibrations from the fertile ground.

The grass-finch runs ahead of us in the narrow track, almost underfoot but loath to take wing. A rabbit crouched so still that he escapes notice until we are almost on him meets our startled discovery with an instant glimpse of brilliant eyes, and then flashes into cover. Lesser companions of the road, these, seen indeed occasionally from the highway but in relations utterly different. There everything beyond the hedge is but detail subordinate to some controlling climax—catching a train, passing a rival, making sixty miles an hour. On the field path there is no climax—or a thousand climaxes. The incidental is all engrossing and the trivial all-important. The world for the time being is limited to each tiny hollow. The sky rests upon a rim we can easily see—so close that the feathered outline of the trees or the wonderful contrast of blue expanse against the luminous green of the clear meadow or the flaming orange of the hawkweed thrills by the very intimacy of its touch.

But the fields are narrowing and the path leads through the bars into the rougher ground of the hill pasture. Having brought us partly under its gentle magic, the spirit of the road grows more careless of disguise and hints of a wilder mood appear. Pan gives us fleeting visions of the tossing horn and flying hoof.

Hoofs, indeed, if not those of Pan, made the

wandering path or labyrinth which now leads us on. Weathered shoulders of the country rock jut through the thin soil, rain-washed and weather-scarred, showing as warm gray masses in a sweep of gray-green fern. Great rounded boulders left by a glacier that melted here in the suns of ages ago are half-hidden by tall canes of blackberry, now curving garlands of white blossom. The hovering air swims in a sea of light and of aromatic odors drawn from plants whose very names—sweet gale, sweet-fern, meadow-sweet—suggest that they appealed to man first (as all nature does to the lower animals) through the sense primitively most acute. Higher still climb the wandering cattle paths. We catch a glimpse of a woodchuck raised straight on his haunches, suspicious and alert, and the next instant scurrying fatly to disappear into his burrow. Another, unseen behind the thicket, startles us with a volley of piercing staccato whistles. Again and again comes the searching, plaintive song of the white-throated sparrow, the blither note of the goldfinch, dipping (like his flight) in the middle of each cadence, and the cheery challenge of the towhee.

The ground is covered with low huckleberries, with here and there a spire of willow-herb or a cluster of little poplars, aftermath of some spreading fire of recent years. Below us are the meadows, our late path showing as if a finger had been drawn lightly across the plastic green, leaving a tiny groove behind it. Poplars grow more thickly, and among them appear small birches and maples, skirmish lines thrown out by the forest in its advance to retake ground from which it was long since driven. We are approaching the upper margin of the clearing and the edge of the timber that stretches back into the mountains, mile upon mile of wilderness. And here we may find the beginning of the Long Trail—perhaps even hear its gipsy call to follow the Magic of the Road to the ends of the earth.

But the voice we hear oftenest and most hauntingly is not that of any such far-faring spirit as

this. Do you remember, dear Lady of the Trail, that little road by a northern lake over which beech trees stretch their slender hands shelteringly? Behind their delicate screen the sky is all clear gold and shafts of level light, striking through, pick out a smooth bole here and there is silvery violet. And like the *sanctus* soaring upward among dusk-dimmed columns of a cathedral choir, rises the singing of a hermit thrush . . . another, and another—and one more, so far away, so glorified, it seems the very intangible spirit of absolute melody! A very little road—scarcely a quarter of a mile through shadow woods—and then emerging into a field where vesper sparrows are singing and the sound of the river steals up from the darkening valley; but it is the little road of dreams-come-true, which has no end but leads always onward to truer dreams to come.

Such is the magic of the Little Road. The highway is tied at both ends to materialities, but the trail is as free as fancy itself. To those who take it, all values range themselves on a new scale. Time loses its long perspective and experiences of the moment seem part of things we did in childhood—yes, part of something stirring out of subconscious memories that are not ours alone but the common inheritance of the race; part also of aspirations and expectancies looking far, far ahead, past life and its limits, into the freedom of the spirit roving beyond the stars.

A magic of make-believe? Ah no! The make-believe, the artificial—the thing that is not worth the struggle it provokes because it perishes at the moment of grasping—is panoplied in the bustle and business of the highway. The little road needs no such pretensions, for in it live beauty, peace, inspiration of joy and exaltation of spirit. These are the elements of its magic; and the subtlety of the charm it puts upon us is to lead us, through the pretense of make-believe, into actually living the eternal verities.

Charles Buxton Going

## SYMBOLISMS

O Earth, thou hast not any wind that blows  
Which is not music; every weed of thine,  
Pressed rightly, flows in aromatic wine  
And every humble hedgerow flower that grows  
And every little brown bird that doth sing  
Hath something greater than itself, and bears  
A living word to every living thing,  
Albeit it hold the Message unawares.  
All shapes and sounds have something which is not  
Of them: a Spirit broods amid the grass;  
Vague outlines of the Everlasting Thought  
Lie in the melting shadows as they pass;  
The touch of an Eternal Presence thrills  
The fringes of the sunsets and the hills.

Richard Realf 1834-1878

Courtesy of Mary H. Jaman.